

Gustavo Pérez

14 March - 5 April 2012

Erskine, Hall & Coe Gallery

An essay to accompany the exhibition, by David Miles



Sitting at my desk I have a restricted outside view; just a wall of London stock bricks, which nevertheless, has endless subtlety of tone. Closer to hand, on an adjacent shelf, is a miniature landscape of pots: bowls by Lucie Rie and Jennifer Lee, a twisted form by Shozo Michikawa and a vessel by Gustavo Pérez. These pots from three continents are good companions.

I can remember the day I acquired the Pérez vessel. It attracted me because it reminded me of the work of the Argentine-Italian artist Lucio Fontana and David Whiting, the distinguished writer on ceramics, noted the same in the catalogue of Gustavo Pérez's Galerie Besson 2001 show. Having seen more of the work of both artists in the past decade I appreciate now that the resemblances are superficial. Fontana first pierced a canvas in 1948 in 'a rage of frustration'. His piercings and slashings were acts of iconoclasm, random and even sexual. This is not the approach of Gustavo

Pérez. As he recently said to me 'everything I make has to do with love for clay, there is no violence in it at all. Clay is more responsive than canvas, it doesn't simply tear.' The US critic Garth Clark was receptive when he wrote of Pérez's 'gentle cuts'.

Gustavo Pérez began his life as a potter forty years ago. In 1971 he had some sort of epiphany, or perhaps a Proust moment, when he was struck by the scent of fresh clay and realized the possibility of giving it form on the wheel. 'It caught me in its trap forever.' As a new potter Pérez did not feel he had any tradition on which to draw. Over the years there has been a direct and continual dialogue with materials. Richard Sennett could have been referring to Gustavo when he said 'craftsmanship is based on slow learning and on habit'. Like all top class art his work is constantly in transition.

In *Contemporary Ceramics* (Thames & Hudson 2009), the late and much missed Emmanuel Cooper, grouped Gustavo under 'Architectural Aesthetics' along with potters such as Bodil Manz and Karin Bablock. Certainly many of Gustavo's pots have an architectural quality. Perhaps it was his education in engineering which gave him a love of precision, an ability to develop the play of light and shadow, and sometimes an industrial simplicity.

As an admirer of Hans Coper he seeks to produce 'objects of complete economy'. Yet even at his most austere there is a delicate sensuousness in his work as he not only cuts, but folds, inlays and paints on clay to emphasise its anthropomorphic qualities. Gustavo is not a pretentious artist. He says 'I can't think of a better way to define my work than by quoting what Franz Schubert once said, 'I just finish one piece and begin the next''.

In the eleven years since Gustavo Pérez's work last graced a London gallery, his voice has become more distinctive, the use of colour more exciting, his love of music more evident in his work. These new pots retain his great sense of precision and skill, yet with an increased sense of rhythm, tension and muscularity. There is a willingness to take risks.

And after half a lifetime of absorbing the aesthetics of modernism there are also powerful echoes of traditional American aesthetics – of Mimbres pots and pueblo architecture, sacred artefacts from the future transported to a Yucatan temple.

Lucian Freud said 'Art derives from art'; perhaps not always with the deliberate intention of the artist. The art of Gustavo Pérez conveys a multiplicity of meanings. These pots are truly multi-vocal.

David Miles